

In "January 1," A New Photography Collection Casts Mummers In A Different Light



Andrea Modica's new book "January 1" takes a unique look at the Mummers through a series of photos taken on Two Street over the past decade.

PHOTO: Andrea Modica

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Wed, Apr 11, 2018

For more than a decade, Andrea Modica has been documenting a long-standing Philadelphia tradition in an old-fashioned way.

She's spent more than ten New Year's Days photographing Mummers on black-and-white film using an 8x10 large-format camera. It's a contemporary device but looks like what you'd picture as an old-time camera: Two large panels, one with a lens and the other with a plate of glass, separated by accordion-style bellows. It's mounted on a large tripod and photographer takes the shot with her head under a curtain.

Taking photos with a camera such as this is a slow process, but one that yields great results. The resulting black-and-white photos provide astounding definition with a subtle, yet distinct old-fashioned aesthetic.

Many of these photos are in Modica's new book, "January 1." Set to be released April 19 with a launch party at The Print Center on Drexel University Campus, the photos tell a story of a decidedly Philadelphia tradition. But, it's described, through images, by someone who, even after a decade, is still an outsider to it.

“It started because I moved in Philadelphia and I was in a sense a tourist,” Modica recalled. “I was asking around what’s fun about Philly and I heard about these ‘Mummers.’ ”

She started off photographing them during rehearsals and other events during the year. But, none of these sessions prepared her for her first New Year’s Day in Philadelphia.

“Then on January first I said, ‘Who are these freewheeling guys in dresses on Two Street? It seemed quite unrelated to what I’d seen before that.’ ”

There were similarities to South Philly in the section of Brooklyn where Modica grew up. But, that was a neighborhood with local ties and family traditions that she’d largely left behind. And, of course, there was nothing like the Mummers in Bay Ridge.

Still, the sense of tradition in the Mummers reminded her of home — and the entire scene on Two Street spoke to her senses as a photographer.

Here, she found generations of Mummers in full costume, men and boys along with wenchies, waiting for the parade to begin.

“Just seeing the lights, it was so, so physically beautiful against the backdrop of Two Street: all those stucco and brick walls, wire fences with leaves falling through. Everything about that particular fabric was eye candy and completely drew me in.”

So, the project became about capturing these people on New Year’s Day as Modica learned more about the people and culture surrounding the festivities.

The equipment itself played a role: using a large-format camera is a slow process. It requires a degree of collaboration between the photographer and the people being documented. Modica became known to many of the Mummers she documented, which made it easier over the years to capture genuine moments.

Still, those moments came through Modica’s own lens in a distinct way: Where the Mummers are known for flashy costumes and performing in groups, the photos in “January 1” put them in a different light. Each portrait is in black and white and features just one or perhaps two Mummers in a shot.

There’s no indication of the other people, and the party, just a few feet away. Instead, it’s just one person, in high detail, and the unique backdrop of the neighborhood.

As different as this perspective seems from the usual Mummer image, it’s been approved — tacitly — by the people she’s documented. Modica’s sent prints to every person she’s photographed over the last decade and says she has never heard a complaint. One mother even sent her a thank-you note, saying her son looked like an angel in the picture.

Whether others will feel the same way remains to be seen — but, also, isn’t necessarily all that important to Modica.

“I would hope in the end that my audience is broad, and not just Mummers fans, and that it would speak to something more universal than the specificity of the actual subjects,” she said.

But ultimately, “This is a personal project. When I’m in it, I want to be as far away from my audience as I can and just be in the moment.”

“January 1” will be released with a launch party and book signing reception at The Print Center, 1614 Latimer St., from 6 – 7:30 p.m. For information, visit www.andreamodica.com.